

Berlin, October 1941

‘I think our man is a soldier. He is someone who enjoys killing. He is cunning and extremely dangerous. He is probably also completely insane.’

Chief Investigator Rolf Schneider of the Berlin Criminal Police Department took a final look at what had once been a young woman. What remained of her now lay at his feet. He didn’t need to be the best detective in Berlin to have arrived at the final part of his conclusion. The head that had been almost severed from the body, and the terror in the dead eyes, gave silent testimony to the frenzied nature of the killing. But maybe it was a jilted lover rather than a madman? No, only a madman would have carved the religious symbol on the chest of his victim. Only a madman would have butchered the stomach to leave the bloody internal organs exposed.

His assistant, Hans Albert, had done his best to ignore the horror but had finally lost that battle, and his breakfast. Now, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief, he tried to redeem himself by emulating his boss’s deductive reasoning.

‘Maybe if we check which army units were in the city at the time of the other five killings, we could narrow down who we are looking for. Then if we interview those soldiers to see where they were on the nights in question, we might get lucky?’

It was almost as though Schneider hadn’t heard him. He was looking at the dead girl’s identity card as if it could tell him something more than the printed information it held. Evidently it could, for suddenly Schneider snapped his fingers, a habit of his when he had made a breakthrough.

‘Of course, of course. It’s been staring me in the face all along. I think I know where to look for our man now.’

He started back to the car, ignoring Albert.

‘Should I ask the army for details of the units that were here?’

Schneider stopped, as if he had heard him for the first time. Perhaps he had. He gave Albert a look that somehow managed to be both dismissive and encouraging at the same time.

‘How many soldiers do you think pass through Berlin on their way to the Russian front? Do you think the army high command would have such details as we require? And even if they did, how long do you think it would take for us to get them? Our man could well have committed another six murders by then. In any event, how do you know he is a soldier?’

‘But you said he was.’

'And do you always believe me?'

Hans Albert nodded. Of course he did, just like every other policeman in Berlin.

Schneider sat in silence on the journey back to police headquarters. He was obviously deep in thought and clearly didn't require any help from his assistant. So, Hans Albert allowed his own mind to run over the investigation to date. And to thank God that he had been assigned to work with the man now regarded by many as Germany's greatest detective.

The first murder had been carried out more than two months earlier. The woman's throat had been cut and she had borne the same mutilations as today's victim. In wartime, lots of people die and there is little time for detailed forensic investigations, so the marks had been put down to other wounds inflicted during the attack. It was only when another two victims were discovered within the space of a week that Schneider had been called in. No other murders took place in August and there was a hope that the killer had either stopped or was no longer in the city. Maybe he had even been killed in an air raid. Schneider had said this man would never stop until he was caught or killed and that, sooner or later, he would strike again and that it would only be in Berlin. He had been right. Since the last week of September there had been three more killings, all bearing the same gruesome hallmarks.

The victims were all respectable women in their mid-twenties. All were married and had apparently

led completely normal lives. None of them had children and none had criminal records. While some had belonged to the Party, none were known to be die-hard Nazis. In short, they were all unremarkable and ostensibly sharing only one thing in common: either by chance or design, they had all fallen victim to the same killer.

Yet Schneider seemed to have seen something in the last victim's identity card. But that was so typical of Schneider. Hans Albert looked across at the unremarkable face of his boss. He was forty-six years old, and it showed. He was single, had no known vices nor interests and lived only for his job. He spent every day and some nights in his office. His home, if it could be called such, was a small one-bedroom flat. No one had ever been invited there and Schneider had never been known to accept an invitation to a colleague's home. He had no female friends, and some said he had no friends, full stop. His life was his work and his work his life. It was almost as if the man didn't exist some of the time, leaving only that brain and its deductions. Whether Schneider was aware of how others viewed him was debatable. What was certain, however, was that he didn't care about the views of others, be they colleagues or criminals. The man who had written that no man was an island had clearly never met Rolf Schneider. He had joined the police as soon as he had been old enough and the myth of Schneider had slowly been born.

Hans Albert mused that, if truth be told, his boss was a bore, perhaps even an eccentric, and would have been treated as such except for his unique ability to solve crimes. In that, he was a genius.

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Back at headquarters, Schneider quickly obtained the information he wanted from all six files. He didn't explain to Hans Albert what he was doing or looking for, but that was his normal way. Albert knew that eventually Schneider would explain, and then maybe he could for a fleeting moment see into and share the mind of genius.

Schneider was poring over the files he had extracted from the well-ordered filing cabinets. The light was dim, in keeping with war-time economics, but German efficiency still prevailed in the filing system. Every crime was recorded, and every citizen had a personal file. And these records were Schneider's territory. He could sift through them for hours, apparently seeing connections that escaped lesser mortals. Albert moved a little closer and noticed that Schneider seemed to be concentrating on the husbands of the victims. This seemed strange to him as he knew that only one of them had been in Berlin at the time of his wife's murder. And it was obvious that the man had been destroyed by her death. In any event, he had an alibi. He was visiting his sick mother in hospital at the time of the murder, and this had been verified. So, what

was so special about these absent husbands? Albert knew all he had to do was wait.

Schneider made what seemed to be a final check and then snapped his fingers.

‘I think we are getting close. So, Hans, tell me what you deduce from the following pieces of information. One. The victims are all married to soldiers in the same regiment. Two. Only one of those soldiers was in Berlin at the time, and we know he is innocent. Three. All the victims are mutilated in the same way.’

Schneider might just as well have asked him to explain the theory of relativity. His blank expression was answer enough for Schneider.

‘Nothing obvious? Then let me help you a little more. Did you notice that this regiment has been stationed in Russia, attached to “police duties” behind the front line? Do you know what “police duties” are, Hans? Of course you do. It means working with our friends in the SS, dealing with “enemies of the state”, whoever they are. Does that help you any further?’

Some men might have been embarrassed by this sort of questioning, but Hans Albert knew that was not Schneider’s intention. It was more akin to a kindly teacher encouraging a slow but keen pupil. Since he still hadn’t made any sense of the clues, he said nothing.

‘A little more then. Did you also note that it was the first murder victim whose husband was here? And did you note what the pathologist told us had been

removed from every single victim? Her womb. So, putting all this together, what does it tell you?’

Hans Albert shrugged. It was still beyond him. But he knew he wouldn’t be alone in that regard. Perhaps the only man who could get something out of this information was Schneider himself. Whether it was by reasoning or some intuition beyond the ken of mere mortals, Hans Albert didn’t know.

‘Well, my dear Hans, it tells me that the unfortunate husband of the first victim knows who the killer is. We only need to ask him. So, get onto army headquarters and find out the current location of Sergeant Helmer. I suspect the poor man will still be in hospital. And if he is, find out from that hospital which of his comrades-in-arms has visited him the most.’

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As usual, Schneider was proved right. Helmer had never really recovered from his wife’s death and was now in a clinic just outside Berlin. The doctors doubted if he would ever make a full recovery. Albert noted with interest that Schneider asked if the killer being caught would help the recovery. Schneider had never been known for his small talk or idle speculation; to ask this, he must be close.

As they waited for the patient to be brought to them, Hans Albert saw the first signs of the effect of a lengthy war. Doctors were noticeable only by their absence. Order had been replaced by disorder: beds were left

unmade, patients were propped in chairs anywhere a space could be found. Nurses rushed and voices were raised, a sure sign of growing chaos. Worst of all was the constantly braying martial music that only served to remind these shattered men of what they once had been and never would be again. Albert hoped he didn't take ill soon.

Sergeant Helmer was less than happy to see Schneider again. The thick-set neck sank even lower into the broad shoulders, and the narrow brow furrowed its displeasure. The eyes still held a trace of the insanity that had brought him here. Deep down among all the other nightmares that must be filling his every waking moment, he knew that at one time he himself must have been a suspect. To be suspected of doing that to your own wife was not something you forgot.

Schneider ignored the sullen anger of the broken man opposite him and tried to make him see that it was normal police behaviour to investigate those closest to the victim. He explained that most victims know their killers, but it was difficult to tell if anything of this got through to Helmer. Finally, Schneider asked the questions that he needed to, knowing the last one could, and probably would, send Helmer completely over the precarious edge of sanity that he was clinging to.

'I think you had a friend with you from the regiment on the day your wife died, didn't you? Who was it?'

Helmer seemed surprised at the question. 'How did you know that?'

'I don't know that. I'm asking you now.'

'Peter Berger. He was new to the regiment, and it was his first leave. He seemed a little lost, so I took him to our house. We had something to eat and then he left for the station to get his connection.'

The eyes became misty. He was starting to remember the last day he saw his wife alive. Schneider had to be quick.

'And I take it that this Peter Berger was less than enthusiastic about your duties in Russia?'

It snapped Helmer back. 'What do you know about our duties in Russia? We only did what we had to, what we were told to do.'

'I'm not criticising you. You were a soldier. You will be one again. I just want to know what Berger thought of what you were doing, that's all.'

Helmer's face mirrored the memory of Russia as his mind took him back to a time when he had been a man, a proud member of the Aryan master race. It hardened as he remembered who had been in charge then, amongst the Jews, amongst the eastern *Untermenschen*, the subhumans.

'We did what was necessary. It was a hard job, but it had to be done for the Reich. But Berger? He was young, from the country. He never liked it, not from the start. He said it was wrong to kill people like that. That God would punish us. So, in the end, we gave up

on him. We'd do the shooting and let him organise the burials and so on. Now I come to think of it, I don't think he ever shot any of the Yids himself. I didn't like it that much myself, but orders are orders. But I sort of felt sorry for him and knew he could end up at the front line if he wasn't careful. So, I sort of took him under my wing, I suppose. Why are you asking this? What's he got to do with . . . with . . . what happened to her?'

Hans Albert was unable to hide his shock at what he was hearing, but Schneider's face was a mask as he pressed on, ignoring the question. He was almost there.

'On the day you took him to your home, did you tell him that you and your wife were planning to start a family?'

Helmer slumped back in his chair as if struck by some invisible force. His lips puffed as he breathed out once, then twice. The eyes bulged until it seemed the sockets would be unable to contain them. And as they grew, the madness in them grew too. The scream that finally broke through the furiously working mouth only confirmed what Schneider already knew.

After they were out of the ward, Schneider asked Albert if he had discovered where Berger's regiment was stationed in Berlin.

'How did you know they're back here?'

Schneider gave him a knowing look and then Albert got his reward. As if a light had suddenly clicked on in a darkened room, he put it together himself.

‘Are we going there to get him now?’

Schneider nodded. You didn’t leave a murderer on the loose for any longer than was necessary.

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Army barracks have that same look the world over. Grey, cold and masculine. Outsiders were not welcomed, and Schneider and Albert were clearly marked as outsiders. They could be nothing else but police, and to the soldier on rest and recuperation that spelled only trouble.

With a very obvious show of bad grace from the guard on duty, they were shown to the commandant’s office. He was a man used to giving orders, not taking them, but when he heard Schneider’s name his attitude softened. It must be serious if he was here. It took less than a minute to confirm that Peter Berger was indeed in the barracks, and a guard was dispatched to summon him to the commandant’s office. The three men waited in silence until the knock at the door announced Berger’s arrival.

‘Private Berger, these men are from the police and would like to ask you some questions.’

Peter Berger was everything the idealised German soldier shouldn’t be. For a start he had black hair and brown eyes. He was short and thin with the face of an innocent. His eyes held the kindly, almost submissive look of a country boy rather than those of the Aryan conqueror. At the mention of the word ‘police’, those

same eyes had taken on the concerned look of someone who might have unwittingly broken some minor law. They were not the eyes of a serial killer.

Schneider sensed that his assistant was starting to doubt his own conclusions and a small smile played across his lips. He himself had no such doubts.

‘My name is Schneider. I am here to arrest you for the murder of six women. Do you have anything to say?’

It was an old ploy of Schneider’s. No gentle introduction, no circuitous questioning, but rather a brutal, all-out assault. Over the years he had seen many reactions to this tactic. Some had hysterically denied any knowledge of the charge, other had started to cry, and some had even confessed on the spot. But whatever they did, they always did something. Peter Berger did nothing. It was as if Schneider had spoken a foreign language.

‘You have nothing to say, then?’

Slowly the head shook, indicating no. There had been absolutely no change on the young soldier’s face. No change at all. He meekly accepted the handcuffs and walked out to the car between Schneider and Albert. He could have been going for a stroll. And then they heard it. Softly, almost inaudibly, Berger was singing. It was a hymn.

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Schneider and Albert went to an interrogation room and waited while Berger was being booked in. Like all

new prisoners, he had to be searched and examined by a doctor to ensure he was up to interrogation. While they waited, Albert risked a question.

‘Why do you think he was singing?’

‘Because he was fulfilling his destiny. He thinks of himself as a martyr now. He has only been serving his God, and the unbelievers – that’s us, by the way – will now make him a martyr. So, he was singing to his God.’

‘Then you think he is insane?’

‘Who knows what insane means these days? I don’t really know what you would call him. But whatever he is, he is our man.’

They spent the best part of an hour trying to get him to talk, but Peter Berger was now beyond such earthly matters. He sat staring blankly, his mind elsewhere. Albert thought that they should simply hand him over to the shrinks. Not that it would matter in Nazi Germany. Insanity would not excuse him from the firing squad. But Schneider was determined to get a response. He decided to try a different tack. Maybe the cold interrogation cell was wrong. He told Albert to give him ten minutes and then to bring Berger up to his room. It was to be one of the few mistakes that Schneider made in his long career.

Schneider told Albert to leave him alone with Berger. Now in the cramped but more human atmosphere of his room, Schneider tried to get inside the mind of the other man. He hitched his chair closer,

and his hands began a strange rhythmic wringing motion. The eyes had taken on a strange intensity that Hans Albert would not have recognised. Nor would he have recognised the voice. Low, almost a whisper, yet strangely staccato, as if the words were coming too fast.

‘I thought it would be better if we spoke here alone. The others wouldn’t understand, you see. I can’t pretend to understand why you did what you did, but I know it must have been the right thing for you to do. I know that the Lord works through you. I have prayed for years that I might also become an instrument of His will. Could you tell me how I can do this? How did the Lord choose you?’

Berger still showed no reaction, so Schneider pressed on, both the hands and words moving faster now.

‘Maybe I’m unworthy in some way. But I want to do the Lord’s will. Maybe it is to help you to carry on with His sacred work. Do you want me to let you go?’

That brought a reaction. Berger was now staring at him. Schneider’s voice dropped to an even more urgent whisper.

‘I can, you know. I’m in charge. I can simply say that I was wrong, that you are innocent. Is that what the Lord wants? Tell me, we don’t have much time.’

When the voice came, it surprised Schneider. It was soft, almost without any intonation, but overlaid with the guttural sounds of a strong Bavarian accent. It sounded like the voice of a lost soul.

‘I want to go home. I want to see Mittenwald again before I die. I don’t deserve to live. What we did in Russia is wrong. It is a sin crying out for vengeance. They made me kill those people. Just because they were Jews. I watched them taking off their clothes and standing there while we shot them. They never tried to stop us. Somebody said it was almost as if they wanted us to kill them, that we must be doing God’s work. But that was when God spoke to me. He told me that this evil that is Germany must end. So, I stopped the killers from fathering more killers. I took their wives in atonement for what we had done in Russia. And now I just want to go home.’

Before Schneider could stop him, Berger rushed towards the window. He went through it headfirst. By the time Schneider reached the window, Berger was a broken heap in the courtyard forty feet below, the dark blood stain already starting to spread beneath him.

When he got down to the courtyard, Schneider looked at the smashed face and twisted body. Already he was asking himself why someone could do the things this boy had done. And then to kill himself. Maybe Berger was insane, but he hadn’t always been. What had changed him? Schneider felt his mind going back to what the young man had told him about the happenings in the east. He knew it was something he had ignored before and insisted others did the same. But could he do it now? What sort of police officer would do that? What sort of man could do it? Before

he could muse further, a car roared into the courtyard and screeched to a halt beside him. An SS officer leapt out. He ignored the human wreckage lying only feet away, as if it was an everyday occurrence for him.

‘You are Chief Investigator Schneider? You have a Peter Berger in custody. Obergruppenführer Heydrich has deemed the matter one of state security and I am here to take him with me. Where is he?’

Schneider nodded to his feet. ‘There he is. I don’t think you’re going to get too much out of him.’

Schneider wondered why someone like Heydrich would be interested. He put it to the back of his mind, but he didn’t forget it.

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‘The body has been taken to the morgue. What do you want done with it after they are finished with it there?’

Schneider seemed to have been affected by the suicide. He had been happy to let Albert tie up the loose ends.

‘Why don’t we send him home to Mittenwald? That’s what he wanted. Find out about his family and try to keep the worst from them if you can.’

Albert hesitated before asking the next question. You could never be too careful. Instinctively, his eyes checked that they were alone.

‘Have you . . . eh . . . thought what you’re going to put into the report to the SD?’

Although the matter was purely a criminal one, every major crime had to be reported to the Sicherheitsdienst, the Reich security service under the command of Reinhard Heydrich.

The question seemed to bring Schneider to himself. 'You mean, am I going to say anything about what Berger told me was happening in Russia?

'It doesn't really have to go in, does it? It doesn't really have that much to do with the killing. He was just insane, wasn't he?'

'Hans, Hans . . . Yes, he was insane, and yes, it would be so easy to leave it at that. But he told me why he did it. I am a policeman. It's not for me to get involved in politics. That's for others. Now leave me to finish this, and then I'm going home for a long sleep.'

As he was writing the report, Schneider mused whether he should accurately report what Berger had said about Russia. The thought had occurred to him, even without his assistant's prompting. He had always stayed clear of politics. Politicians just talked endlessly, they never actually did anything. He talked only when necessary. He was a doer. Talking served no purpose unless it was followed by action.

The coming to power of the Nazis had meant little to him. Wars start and wars finish, but crime is constant. Like everyone else, he had heard the whispers and the rumours about what was happening in the east and in the concentration camps and, like most other Germans, he ignored them. It was the safest course of

action. In any event, what could he do? Speaking out against what was happening would achieve nothing apart from his dismissal from the police, and he was arrogant enough to think that was not in Germany's interest.

He had seen the yellow stars of David appear, and the disappearance of Jewish police officers and lawyers. He didn't want to think about it. It was the law, after all, and he was a police officer, nothing else. But should a law like that even exist? Such matters were for the politicians or the philosophers, not for the likes of him. But now he couldn't put Berger's words out of his head. He felt it would almost be betraying him not to report what he had said. He put Berger's final words into his report. Let them do what they want with it and with him. He threw the report into the typing basket and headed home.

If you had told Schneider that in less than a year, he would be investigating the SS itself on the direct order of Adolf Hitler, he would have thought you as insane as Berger.